

10-2014

"Railroads, Commerce, and Energy- We've Got Everything you could ever want"

George M. Cooper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Cooper, George M. (2014) ""Railroads, Commerce, and Energy- We've Got Everything you could ever want"," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol52/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

“Railroads, Commerce, and Energy – We’ve Got Everything You Could Ever Want”

BY GEORGE M. COOPER

In 1839, T. W. Bell crossed the Brazos River on the way to Austin, Texas from his home in Kentucky. After passing through what is now Milam County, Bell wrote his family that the territory was “wild woods where nothing inhabit [*sic*] but the wild beasts of the forest and the savage Indians.”¹ Thirty-five years later, the land along the Brazos had been cleared and put to the plow for cotton, as had that along the Little River, but not much else had changed. Today, Milam County is still essentially rural, and the economy is primarily agricultural.

Milam County, just over 1,000 square miles of east central Texas, is the rump of the original county created by the Republic of Texas. Carved from the Robertson’s Colony north of Stephen F. Austin’s original *empresario* grant, it is 60 miles northeast of Austin and 140 miles south of Dallas.² An outgrowth of what I have elsewhere called an “Internal Frontier,” little has been written about Milam County.³ Most publications are of the booster nature, with a couple of somewhat dated master’s theses written in the first half of the twentieth century,⁴ and one a little more recent.⁵ This paper addresses some of the unique history of this forgotten area of Texas, and will eventually form part of a much larger analysis.

The First Congress of the Republic of Texas in 1837 recognized the Municipality of Milam, occupying roughly the same area as the Robertson Colony. The name was changed from the Municipality of Viesca to Milam County, honoring Ben Milam, who lost his life in the 1835 assault on Bexar. Out of a rather undefined area in excess of 26,000 square miles, the Republic, and subsequently the State of Texas, carved fifteen counties, and portions of eighteen others.

Lelia M. Batte, in her 1956 *History of Milam County, Texas*, noted that “Milam County was off the beaten track between San Antonio and Nacogdoches,”⁶ after the Spanish abandoned attempts to establish missions and presidios in the area for the benefit of the local Indian tribes in the 1750s.⁷ Little changed during the Mexican and Republic of Texas eras. Robertson argued that he had made progress in importing the required 200 immigrant families, but this was a fabrication intended to keep the land out of the

George Cooper is an Adjunct Instructor of History at Lone Star College.

hands of Stephen F. Austin and his partner Samuel May Williams. Few if any immigrants actually settled in the colony during the Mexican colonial period.

Sterling Clack Robertson found the lack of settlers a tremendous problem during the period of the Texas Republic, as there was little to attract settlers to the core of Milam County. The early county seat was Nashville-on-the-Brazos. Situated on the east bank of the Brazos River, and due east of present day Cameron, Nashville was once a candidate as the seat of government for the Republic of Texas. The town began to decline after Austin was chosen as the capital of the Republic. For a brief period, the county government was moved to Caldwell, today the county seat for Burleson County.⁸ The legislature decided to move the county seat to Cameron, which did not yet exist in 1846. The final nail in Nashville's coffin was construction of the Texas and Houston Railroad through Hearne. Most of Nashville's citizens moved to Hearne, which soon became a booming commercial village.

In April 1846, the Republic of Texas legislature authorized the relocation of the county seat to a site chosen by a seven member committee. The committee selected a sixty acre site, purchased from Daniel Monroe's grant on the Little River and situated roughly in the center of the county. In fact, the current geographic center of the county lies four miles south of Cameron.⁹ There were few advantages to the site other than its central location near a stream, sporting a fresh water supply. No town existed, few roads traversed the county, and for all practical purposes, the waterways were too shallow and unreliable.

The site selection committee named the new county seat Cameron in honor of Ewen Cameron, who lost his life in the Mier expedition. The county courthouse was erected in 1846, but the nearest railroad connection was at Hearne, over fifty miles away. Attempts were made to navigate the Little River which turned out to be wholly unreliable as a waterway. As a result, Cameron was hardly more successful than the rest of the county. By 1850, the population of the county had only reached 2,907. Ten years later, the population increased to 5,175, of which roughly 30 percent were slaves.¹⁰

Until 1872, Milam County was devoid of railroad lines. The Houston and Texas Central Railway, originally chartered as the Galveston and Red River Railway in 1842, planned construction of a railroad from Houston to the Brazos River, and eventually into central Texas. In 1856, the G & RR, renamed the Houston and Texas Central, had completed twenty-five miles to Cypress Station from Houston. As Texans rode off to join their fellow Confederates, the road extended to Millican, eighty-one miles from

Houston, but still twenty-four miles from Hearne. The Civil War halted construction of the road, but by 1871 the line reached Corsicana, in 1872 Dallas, and in 1874 Red River City in Northeast Texas. Hearne, on the Brazos River, was the western point on the railroad's north-south central Texas route.

On September 20, 1873, the International Railroad and the Houston and Great Northern Railroad merged to form the International – Great Northern Railroad. According to the *New York Times*, one of the two roads was sold at foreclosure,¹¹ but Texas railroad expert S. G. Reed only states that the International Railroad was in bankruptcy.¹² Based in Houston at the time of the merger, the Houston and Great Northern owned 252 miles of line, primarily between Houston and Palestine, and Houston and East Columbia, with no penetration into Milam County. The International Railroad was formed in 1870 with the intent to build a line from the Northeastern corner of Texas to Mexico. At the time of the merger, 177 miles of track were in operation between Longview and Hearne. Almost immediately, the new railway crossed the Brazos River and pushed on through Milam County toward Austin, reaching the state capital in 1876 and Laredo in 1881.

As soon as the railroad crossed the Brazos, a railhead was needed from which to base operations as the push continued to Austin. The state constitution prohibited transfer of state public lands to railroad companies if that land was to be resold to settlers.¹³ The railroads instead obtained land either through purchase or private donation. In the case of the railhead community in Milam County, the International – Great Northern purchased four hundred acres from George Greene, B.F. Ackerman, and Frank Smith. A town was laid out, and lots were sold at auction on September 3, 1873. The town was named Rockdale by the wife of B.F. Ackerman, who reportedly spied a twelve foot high rock with a circumference of some twenty feet in a dale outside of the new community, as she traveled the thirteen miles from Cameron to the auction.

Those purchasing lots were a diverse group, including merchants from Charleston, South Carolina and European Jews who migrated through New Orleans and Washington County before arriving at the new railhead town. As the first railroad community in the county, and with an entrepreneurial population, Rockdale soon became the economic center of Milam County. The town incorporated in 1878, established an aldermanic form of government and soon challenged Cameron for economic and political dominance of the county. Early leadership came from H. H. Coffield, a hardware merchant originally from South Carolina, and brothers Benjamin and Joseph Lowenstein, dry goods merchants from Pomerania. Within ten

years of its creation, Rockdale boasted 1,700 residents, the largest community in the county. It also numbered five churches, two schools, two grist mills, cotton mills, a 250 seat opera house, a private bank, a newspaper, a German singing club, and a city cemetery, which included a separate Jewish cemetery for residents following that faith. As the economic anchor of the county, it shipped cotton, wool, vegetables, fruits, grain, hides, and livestock produced by the farmers and ranchers in the county, primarily to Houston and San Antonio.

Over the next ten years, Rockdale was joined by Gause, Milano, and Thorndale on the International-Great Northern route through the county. With increased access to markets, the population and the economy of the county expanded rapidly. Further, arrival of the railroad signaled an end to the economic malaise that settled on the county after the Civil War.¹⁴

The citizens of San Antonio decided they needed a rail line connecting their city with Aransas Pass, allowing access to the Gulf Coast without having to go through Houston or Galveston. Congress, in 1879, authorized deepening of Aransas but provided no funds for the project, nor did it direct the Corp of Engineers to actively pursue the project. Nonetheless, proponents set about building a railroad connecting Texas' second largest city to the coast. Interestingly, prior to 1900, the primary contractor for the road was Mifflin Kenedy, a name closely associated with Corpus Christi and south Texas. The route from San Antonio ran to Corpus Christi, not Aransas Pass. By 1887, 222 miles of road were laid between Corpus Christi and San Antonio, and San Antonio and Kerrville to the west. By 1891, an additional 172 miles of line were completed between Yoakum and Waco on the Brazos River. The line passed through both Rockdale and Cameron, effectively providing Rockdale a north – south line, complementing its existing east – west line, and cementing Rockdale's position as the primary market town in the county.

Jay Gould acquired the International - Great Northern in 1879, adding it to his railroad empire, giving Rockdale access to markets as distant as Buffalo, New York.¹⁵ After the financial crisis of 1907, the St. Louis - San Francisco Railroad Company contracted to purchase the International - Great Northern for access to Galveston.¹⁶ The bid was unsuccessful, and ultimately the company, controlled by the heirs of Jay Gould, went into receivership.

In 1903, the Southern Pacific Railroad, major competitor of the San Antonio & Aransas Pass, decided that purchasing the road was better than competing with it, and Rockdale found itself on a major line. The Attorney General of Texas sued, forcing Southern Pacific to divest itself of the San Antonio & Aransas Pass because of a state law prohibiting common

ownership of parallel competing rail lines. Southern Pacific sold the line, but was required to guarantee the San Antonio & Aransas Pass's bonds, which insured that the line would remain in operation, providing communities in rural Texas access to rail service. Ultimately, Southern Pacific reacquired the San Antonio & Aransas Pass, but the roads were abandoned by 1994, at a time when all railroads were struggling to survive.

Although Rockdale supported multiple businesses and a progressive government, probably the biggest factor affecting the economic development of Milam County was the advent of lignite mining in and around the community. The coal deposits had been surveyed by Samuel B. Buckley, Assistant State Geologist, seven years prior to the founding of Rockdale.¹⁷ While I have not yet found verification that the presence of large lignite deposits dictated the eventual route of the I-GNR, it seems logical that the railroad would seek alternate combustibles as the line moved away from the heavily wooded areas of East Texas. George Vogel began mining lignite three miles east of Rockdale in 1889. Within three years, he was joined by the Rockdale Mining and Manufacturing Company which drove a slope shaft mine, similar to Vogel's, within five hundred feet of the Vogel mine.¹⁸ Obviously working the same seam, both mines had easy access to the I-GNR road, facilitating shipment of the product to market.

The coal in Milam County is a low grade lignite of the Wilcox Grade of strata found throughout Texas, north and east of the Colorado River.¹⁹ Several mines in the area operated for a number of years, but the largest was the Sandow mine, located eight miles southwest of Rockdale. Originally the site was occupied by the village of Freezeout, so named by the mule drivers who stopped there prior to the arrival of the railroad. Freezeout featured a trading post, quarter-mile racetrack, and several saloons. The same year Rockdale was founded, Freezeout changed its name to Millerton in honor of Emil Miller, who donated land for a school. The Millerton post office closed in 1876, indicative of a population decline, but re-opened in 1889 when commercial coal mining started. The post office closed permanently in 1891, as mail began being routed through Rockdale.

By 1895, six coal mines were operating in the Rockdale area, shipping a total of twenty-nine rail cars of coal daily.²⁰ Eight years later, the number of mines remained the same, but Vogel was no longer involved in the ownership of any. In at least two instances, the Big Lump Coal Company and the Lignite Eggette and Coal Company, both owned by S. J. Taylor,²¹ brought in villages of Mexican laborers to work the mines. These villages were estranged from the rest of Milam County, largely by culture and language, but also by company practices that paid the workers in company script, which meant all purchases had to be made through

the company store. The employee count at the Lignite Eggette and Coal Company reached 140, and Big Lump employees numbered 50, making them the first and third largest employers in the county. In that same year, 1904, the second largest employer was the Black Diamond Coal Company owned by Gus Lorenz.²²

By 1910, the mines and their ownership had changed. Eleven mines were operating, only three of which had been in operation fifteen years earlier. The Vogel and Lorenz Mine previously operated as the Black Diamond Mine in 1895. Gus Lorenz, the superintendent of the Black Diamond, retained that position at the Vogel and Lorenz mine.²³

In 1918, the Federal Fuel Company, now owners of the mine at Millerton, began construction of a six mile railroad to connect with the International – Great Northern at Rockdale. Federal Fuel was soon bankrupt and the connection went unfinished. In 1922, McAlester Fuel Company bought the mine and the remains of the railroad. Putting first things first, McAlester changed the name of Millerton to Sandow, after Flo Ziegfeld's strongman, then completed the rail line in 1923. Over the next twenty-five years, the Sandow mine shipped lignite for the central heating needs at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas A & M University in College Station, and to power the plants of the San Antonio Public Service facility in New Braunfels and the Texas Power and Light Company in Trinidad. Slowly, however, the development of cheaper sources of power, particularly natural gas, destabilized the lignite industry in Texas, forcing closure of the Sandow mine 1950.

Throughout the First World War, however, coal production increased. In 1915, slightly over seven thousand cars of lignite were shipped out of Milam County to the various markets in Texas. Harriet Smith and Darthula Walker, in their 1923 publication *The Geography of Texas*, maintain that substantial amounts of lignite were being mined in various communities throughout the Timberbelt, and specifically mention Rockdale.²⁴

Demand began to fall shortly after the war. By 1924 only six mines remained in operation. Those six included The McAlester Fuel Company, which continued until 1951. Despite the downturn in demand as consumers shifted to natural gas, the peak year for production came in 1931 in which an average of 1,000 tons of coal were shipped per day out of Milam County.

In the stampede to discover oil and gas deposits in Texas, permits were taken for oil exploration in the early 1920s. The majority of new fields discovered and opened were in Central and North Central Texas. A number of small fields were developed on the Austin Chalk Formation, beginning in 1913. Rockdale and Milam County were not left out. In 1921, a shallow field was opened up outside the village of Minerva, located six

miles south of Cameron on the San Antonio & Aransas Pass road between Cameron and Rockdale. Production from that field peaked in 1927 with 445,985 barrels for the year. Output from the Minerva field has declined ever since, but shallow wells are found all over the county and production continues.

Despite subsequent major discoveries in the Austin Chalk Formation during the 1930's, Milam County was too far east to enjoy the full benefits of the petroleum boom. Even so, I know of at least three wells that were drilled within five miles of Rockdale in 1994 and 1995, all of which are still producing today. In many places, natural gas was siphoned off as waste residue. It is only since the turn of the century that natural gas from these wells has gained status as a profitable by-product. Natural gas production in Milam County, as an alternative to lignite, increased in popularity when major coal consumers made the switch to this economical fuel. Cheaper and cleaner burning, natural gas ultimately forced the closure of all of the lignite mines in the county. The biggest problem is that small operators, flying under the radar of the Environmental Protection Agency, freely violate regulations regarding pollution clean up and disposal, and sections of farms throughout the county are damaged, limiting or outright prohibiting agricultural pursuits.

Smith and Walker estimated that since approximately one-half of the United States' lignite coal reserves lay in a belt from Marshall to Laredo, should a system for extracting adequate amounts of energy from brown coal be developed, all of Texas' industrial power needs would be met.²⁵ In 1951, new methodologies for extracting energy from lignite made brown coal again economically viable as a power source. Although the last of the coal mines closed in 1951, the Alcoa Company, after an extensive search, built a new plant in Rockdale because of the presence of large lignite deposits in the area. Alcoa purchased the old Sandow mine site, and in 1954 opened the Rockdale plant. Alcoa's influence on the local economy cannot be overstated. The county's single largest employer, Alcoa offered plant labor jobs to residents of the entire southern part of Milam County. Most were subsistence farmers who saw the plant as an opportunity for economic advancement. Few, however, gave up agriculture or cattle ranching and instead used the income from working at the plant to maintain family farmsteads. Housing for plant management was needed, prompting the development of a new subdivision on the south side of Rockdale in the 1950s, boosting the city's population.

Smith and Walker also predicted, "Some day we shall probably have a big central power plant to convert the energy of lignite into electrical power at the mines, and this power will be sent over wires to industrial centers."²⁶

Two years ago it appeared that day had arrived. As the domestic cost of producing aluminum at a plant in rural Texas became prohibitive, vis-à-vis that produced overseas, Alcoa looked for other industries interested in utilizing not only the plant facilities located just outside Rockdale, but also the permits and exemptions Alcoa had been granted by state and federal environmental regulators. Alcoa eventually sold the plant, permits, and mining operations to Luminate Power, a supplier of energy for the growing Austin market, but Luminate's ongoing problems with environmentalists led them to shut down their operations.

Despite the relatively large number of coal mines in a relatively small area, most within a ten mile radius of Rockdale, the county is for the most part free of slag heaps left when the mines closed. One major exception is at the Sandow Mine, where the ground is scarred by strip mining. On clear winter nights, the glow from the plant lighted up the sky for miles. Mounds of earth, residue from Alcoa's draglines, block all view of the plant from nearby highways. Although federal and state regulations require restoration and/or reclamation of land damaged from strip mining, Alcoa has not fully complied. Currently, environmental interests from Austin are leading the fight for compliance.

Alcoa also left one other invisible marker on the community. At the time the plant was built, the hot water pipes feeding the three pot lines were protected with asbestos insulation. Alcoa took remedial steps and removed the asbestos insulation. However, the removal process was probably unsafe, particularly by today's standards. Asbestos fibers migrated into the plant environment, settling in the lungs of many workers. As one might expect, the death rate resulting from exposure to asbestos is much higher in Rockdale than one would anticipate in a small rural community.

Aside from the fact that, according to the Rockdale Chamber of Commerce, its current population totals just over 6,000, Rockdale doesn't qualify as a city at all. Prior to the arrival of the railroad, and the founding of Rockdale, the city government of Cameron had been dissolved and re-chartered three times. The threat of a larger, more aggressively capitalist community seventeen miles to the south obviously impacted Cameron's stability. Rockdale became the first industrial and cultural center in the county, and even today it is the driving force within the county. Yet, the town and the county can hardly be considered part of Texas' urban landscape. Between the census of 1900 and 2000, the county's population declined by more than thirty-five percent. Since the 2000 census, it is estimated that Milam County's population has grown by approximately 1,000, or roughly four percent, while the state as a whole has grown at a rate approaching thirteen percent. That may be changing, as it appears many

Austinites, looking for escape from the compression of urban living, are moving to Rockdale in increasing numbers. The future of the county may lie in its potential as an extended bedroom community, much as Fairfield, Bentwater, and other areas attracted Houstonians north and westward in the 1980s and 1990s. Should the trend continue, Rockdale, having experienced some of the problems of urbanization and industrialization, and despite no longer having a second railroad, may eventually become a big town.

ENDNOTES

¹ T. W. Bell, Letter to W. A. Bell, 7 August 1839 in "Thomas W. Bell Letters," E. Llerena Friend, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 68, no. 1 (July 1959), 104.

² Cecil Harper Jr. & Vivian Elizabeth Smyrl, "Milam County," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/hadbook/online/articles/MM/hcm13.html> (accessed September 21, 2008).

³ George M. Cooper, "The Family of Benjamin Lowenstein, Jewish Immigrants to Southern Milam County," M.A. Thesis, Sam Houston State University, (1994), 2.

⁴ Lelia M. Batte, *History of Milam County, Texas* (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1956); Ida Jo. Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial: A History of Rockdale, Texas 1874 – 1974* (Rockdale: The Rockdale Reporter, 1974); Milam County Heritage Preservation Society, *Matchless Milam: A History of Milam County, Texas* (1984); Margaret Eleanor Lengert, "The History of Milam County," M.A. Thesis, University of Texas, Austin (1949).

⁵ Philip Guy Pope, "Urban Rivalry in an Rural County: The Contest for Dominance Between Rockdale and Cameron in Milam County, Texas, 1873 – 1954," M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, (2006).

⁶ Batte, *Op. Cit.* 11.

⁷ Harper & Smyrl, *Ibid.*

⁸ Harper & Smyrl, *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *New York Times*, February 27, 1908. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract/html?res=9C0DE0D81F3EE233A23754C2A9649C9> (accessed March 13, 2008).

¹² S. G. Reed, *A History of the Texas Railroads and Transportation Conditions under Spain and Mexico and the Republic and the State* (Houston: The St. Clair Publishing Co., 1941), 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Harper & Smryl, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁵ "Brief History of the Missouri Pacific," <http://www.skyways.org/history/mp.mphist.html> (accessed March 13, 2008).

¹⁶ *New York Times*, December 28, 1922. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract/html?res=9503EED61630E433A2475BC2A9649D9> (accessed March 14, 2008).

¹⁷ Ida Jo Marshall, "Milam County, Texas- A History of Rockdale Texas (Lignite in the Rockdale Area)." <ftp://fftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/tx/milam/history/rockdale/pg004.txt>. (accessed April 22, 2008).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Harriet Smith & Darthula Walker, *The Geography of Texas* (Chicago; Ginn and Company and Company, 1923), 19.

²⁰ Marshall, *Op. Cit.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Smith & Walker, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 216-217.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 200.